

Arts & Culture

Still swinging! Against the odds, last remaining square dancing clubs maintain loyal following

By Brett Blocker
Editor

Once a staple of the rural Friday evening, the weekly small town square dance of today is a far cry from its former glory.

Whether due to the rise of rock and roll, affordable TVs or simply the changing of the times, the tradition has suffered a steady decline in popularity over the years, with venues shrinking from the youth-packed ballrooms of yesteryear to local elementary school gymnasiums, churches and civic centers.

But regardless of the reasons for the dance's decline, whether social or technological, a bastion of two local square dancing clubs nevertheless holds out.

Each second and third Saturday of the month, members of the Koronis Night Owls and Jolly Twirlers square dancing clubs assemble at either the Paynesville Elementary School or Jefferson Learning Center in Willmar. Clad in authentic prairie skirts and cowboy boots, dancers of all ages and

ago there were about 10 clubs in Stearns County, and seven in Kandiyohi County," Koronis Night Owls President Andy Flint said. "There used to be a club in every town. Now, there's just one in Kandiyohi County and three in Stearns."

During the Night Owls' height in 1984-85, membership totalled 200 registered members. Today, there are just 18 in the Koronis Night Owls and 21 in the Jolly Twirlers.

Nevertheless, both clubs retain a devoted following. What keeps their dancers coming back each month, Flint said, is the simple fact that it's fun and easy to learn.

"The thing about square dancing is people don't realize how much fun they'll have until they try it. People go out there on the dance floor and forget about their problems for a while. You don't have time to think about anything else because it takes all of your concentration to make sure you don't mess up your steps."

Dancers of all ages and ability are welcome, and neither specific clothing nor a



Photo by Brett Blocker

Caller Abe Maier leads a group of Jolly Twirlers in sing and patter calls at the club's monthly dance in Willmar's Jefferson Learning Center.

main wallflowers for long.

"It's a great way to get out there and socialize with people you wouldn't otherwise meet. When I started dancing, I was single, and it was a good, safe way to get out and socialize without worrying about where you were and who you were with. You could go out as a single person and dance as much as you wanted, and others could go as couples."

Although formal attire is not required, dancers are advised to wear comfortable shoes. In an average night, dancers can expect to get in between 8-10,000 steps. And if the caller is talented, said Flint, "you won't even know you're exercising."

A predecessor to the modern D.J., a caller's job is to set the pace of the dance, "call" the steps, sing and entertain. A skilled caller also must be able to read the crowd to determine whether or not the pace is too fast or slow. In order to learn the trade, many take calling courses.

According to Flint, there are only about 20 callers in the

state.

"It's a craft. Not everybody is able to do it, and it takes years to really learn," she said.

To ensure their clubs aren't left dancing to acappella, the Night Owls and the Jolly Twirlers often book their callers weeks in advance.

For a taste of the authentic folk dance experience, both clubs are inviting the public to attend upcoming weekly lessons at their respective locations.

The Jolly Twirlers will be holding lessons at the Jefferson Learning Center in Willmar

every Monday from 6:30-9 p.m. beginning Monday, November 5. Cost is \$3 for adults and half-price for children.

The Koronis Night Owls will hold their lessons beginning Tuesday, November 6 from 7-9 p.m. at the Paynesville Middle School. The first two weeks are free of charge, and \$5 per person afterward.

For more information, contact Koronis Night Owls President Andy Flint at: (320) 354-3580, or Jolly Twirlers President Jerry Kozubik at: (320) 329-8115.



Photo Courtesy of Kandiyohi County Historical Society

The Snowflake Show at the Willmar City Auditorium January 23, 1957.

abilities sway to the sound of a live old-school hoedown.

They are among just two local clubs in the area.

"Up until just a few years

partner are required to participate. Of the Night Owls' regular dancers, roughly one-third arrive alone. However, said Flint, they are unlikely to re-

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